

# POINT OF VIEW

## 'Enhancements' mask road needs

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FOR many years, Oklahoma has been a "donor state," getting back far less than our motorists pay in federal fuel taxes.

A major reason is the taxes paid by drivers don't all go to our roads. Almost one-sixth of federal fuel taxes are diverted to pay transit subsidies — mostly to benefit states with elaborate (and heavily subsidized) mass-transit systems. That diversion now totals \$5 billion per year, at a time when too many roads are in disrepair.

While diversion and inflation have hurt our Highway Trust Fund, the needs have grown immensely. More than 90 percent of America's passenger miles and 71 percent of the freight tonnage go by road, because no alternative offers the Istook

huge flexibility provided by roads and highways. Yet when fuel tax dollars aren't used to improve highways, congestion results, and gridlocked cars generate avoidable pollution.

Our roads are being shortchanged, and so are our bridges. The country now has 167,000 deficient bridges — 28 percent of the total. The national backlog of needed road and bridge work now tops \$325 billion, and some say it's \$400 billion. This backlog costs lives.

Yet there's another major diversion, even after transit takes its cut. Even though Oklahoma has 9,228 structurally deficient or dangerous bridges and 3,197 miles of highways rated as critical or inadequate, another federal law dictates that each state must spend another 10 percent of all surface transportation program funds on "transportation enhancements."

What are those? In part, these are bicycle and pedestrian trails, but our fuel tax dollars are also spent restoring old buildings, creating transportation museums and buying rail right of way. These enhancements are popular with many people, but they don't move any of the traffic that paid the fuel taxes. These mandated diversions take another \$648 million per year that could help fix roads and bridges.

Sadly, those who clamor for enhancements don't offer to pay for them. Instead, they insist that fuel taxes must be diverted from road and bridge repairs, even at the expense of safety.

This can be changed. In a few weeks, Congress will be asked to agree that enhancements should be permitted rather than mandated. This change would permit states to use the \$648 million for roads and bridges if they wish.

This money comes from the fuel taxes paid by each state's road users, and we should trust states to assess their own needs and decide for themselves how to spend the money. It would greatly help to relieve congestion and correct unsafe roads and bridges.

Diversions began at a time when fuel tax revenue was constantly rising, so it was easier to afford "enhancements." Today things are different; highway funding is billions short from even covering the basic needs. The backlog is so great that many support raising fuel taxes to address it. Before raising taxes, shouldn't we maximize how we use what we already collect?

It's time to revisit how our transportation dollars are spent. I've worked to assure that Oklahoma won't be a donor state this year. But it's not a permanent fix; that would require correcting our national priorities. Each mode of transportation should help pay for itself, rather than expecting road users to pay for everyone else. Let's not overtax America's drivers, but keep America moving.

